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ABSTRACT

California's continuous-improvement accountability system in which all elements are aligned and work together for the purpose of promoting and improving student learning is presented. The state's comprehensive, standards-based system rests on five key components: (1) student learning and achievement are at the heart of education; (2) standards are the basis of a statewide accountability system for continuous improvement; (3) assessment measures student attainment of standards, guides instruction, informs students and parents of progress, and provides information on program effectiveness; (4) support and resources are needed to implement the elements of a continuous-improvement accountability system; and (5) a standards-based accountability system fully shared and supported by all stakeholders will ensure the needed systemic changes for improved student learning. (RJM)

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STANDARDS BASED ACCOUNTABILITY: *A DESIGN FOR STUDENT SUCCESS*

THE ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

EA028878

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STANDARDS-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY:
A DESIGN FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

A Position Paper of
The Association of California
School Administrators

Prepared by the ACSA Task Force on Student
Performance & School Accountability

November 1997

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student learning and achievement are at the heart of our educational system in California. They are not ends in themselves, but means to a successful transition to postsecondary education, a career and to becoming effective and productive members of society. We, the members of the Association of California School Administrators, are serious and passionate about educating our diverse student population. We hold the same high expectations for all students. We believe that every child can aspire to and achieve high standards. We support the major systemic changes needed to improve student achievement in this state.

As educators we want and expect to be held accountable for student learning. This is our job. Therefore, we welcome a comprehensive, continuous improvement accountability system in which all elements are aligned and work together for the purpose of promoting and improving student learning.

We welcome a comprehensive, standards-based accountability system for continuous improvement. This accountability system rests on five key components, aligned and working together, to promote and improve student learning. These components include:

- **content standards** – to define what students should know and be able to do;
- **performance standards** – to define levels of proficiency;
- **appropriate assessments** – to determine if learning has occurred and to guide and inform instruction;
- **resources and support** – to assure all schools can successfully implement a standards-based accountability system; and
- **shared responsibility by all stakeholders** – to ensure that students, parents, educators and community members have clearly defined roles and accept their responsibilities.

The positions articulated in this document are grounded in research and experience in schools and districts in California. They represent the best practices of states and districts around the country. They are essential to an effective statewide comprehensive standards-based accountability system that focuses on student learning and achievement.

ACSA supports these statements:

1. We believe that student learning and achievement are the heart of education.
2. We believe that standards are the basis of a statewide accountability system for continuous improvement.
3. We believe that assessment measures student attainment of standards, guides instruction, informs students and parents of progress and provides information on program effectiveness.
4. We believe that support and resources must be provided to successfully implement the components of the accountability system.
5. We believe that a standards-based accountability system fully shared and supported by stakeholders will ensure the needed systemic changes for improved student learning and achievement.

This is a critical time for public education in California. ACSA is in a unique position to monitor interests and concerns at all levels and to recommend appropriate policies and legislation. We support policies and practices to build a comprehensive standards-based accountability system for continuous improvement, to bring about the necessary systemic changes and to create the expertise needed to ensure its effectiveness.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

ACSA Positions

1. We believe that student learning and achievement are at the heart of education.

The primary reason for an accountability system is to ensure the learning and achievement of all students. Every element of an accountability system should directly support and promote increased learning and achievement.

2. We believe that standards are the basis of a statewide accountability system for continuous improvement.

Content standards specify what students should know and be able to do. They provide clear and fixed targets for curriculum, instruction and assessment, and must be clearly understood by students, parents, teachers and members of the community. They should reflect agreement among educators and the community about what is important for California students to learn.

Performance standards define the expected level of achievement of the content standards; that is, they spell out "how good is good enough." Performance standards should articulate and target high expectations, not minimum competency.

Both content and performance standards should provide the foundation for decision-making regarding student learning and achievement, curriculum and instruction, assessment, professional staff development and distribution of resources. It is essential that all state curriculum frameworks be aligned with state standards. Thus, standards become the foundation for the statewide standards-based accountability system.

Content and performance standards should be developed at the state level for elementary, middle and high schools. These state standards should cover the core subjects (reading, language arts, math, science and history-social science). State standards should be voluntary. That is, districts should be required to adopt local standards that meet or exceed state standards. State standards should provide a foundation on

which local districts can build. State standards will provide needed consistency in curriculum within and across schools and districts. Such consistency ensures access to a common core of information and skills for all students. This is particularly important in California, where transiency is high.

Standards should be reasonable in number, understandable, doable, measurable and realistic in terms of instructional time and resources. Standards should be consistent for all students, regardless of gender, race ethnicity or socio-economic status, ensuring equal access for California's diverse population. Students with special needs and students who are having difficulty meeting standards should be provided with the appropriate interventions, time and resources. They must be provided appropriate and reasonable assistance in meeting standards. All stakeholders must be held responsible to ensure that all students are successful.

As a result of the standards component of the continuous improvement accountability system, we expect the following:

- Greater consistency in curriculum in core content areas across districts in California.
- Improved articulation of curriculum from grade to grade and level to level.
- A coherent and focused vision for all California schools.
- Higher levels of expectation and achievement for all California students.

3. We believe that assessment measures student attainment of standards, guides instruction, informs students and parents of progress, and provides information on program effectiveness.

Assessment is the critical linchpin in the accountability system. It provides all stakeholders with information as to how well students, schools and programs are succeeding, and it identifies areas needing improvement. Thus, the focus of assessment shifts from judgment to continuous improvement.

To successfully measure student attainment of standards:

- State and local assessments should be aligned with content standards. State assessments should cover core-area content standards (reading/language arts, math, science and history/social science).
- Multiple assessments—state and local—must be used to determine student progress toward achieving standards. At the classroom level, teachers should use multiple assessments to place, diagnose, monitor and report individual student progress. Multiple assessments should include student self-assessments, teacher observations, portfolios, performance tasks, projects, teacher-made tests and publisher-made tests. These assessments should include a mechanism for the immediate feedback students and teachers need to make timely decisions about instruction and learning. Standards-based assessments, used by the school, district and state, should confirm and validate individual teacher findings.
- The processes to measure student progress toward reaching standards should reflect current and best research.
- Comprehensive data reports must be prepared regularly and provided to schools for analysis. Data should be divided to monitor progress of various subgroups in the schools.

- Local schools and districts must be able to augment the state assessment data for school accountability. All of the data sources—classroom, school, district and state—should provide a complete picture of continuous improvement.
- State assessments in the core content areas must be administered annually for school accountability purposes.
- Assessments in the core content areas must be administered at different grade levels so that no single grade level bears the burden of taking all state tests.
- The assessment system should provide the data required by state and federal agencies.
- State and local assessments should be valid, reliable and fair.
- Performance levels should be used to define students' demonstrated proficiency at various points as they progress toward achieving standards.

To successfully guide instruction:

- Assessments should provide continuous data about student learning so teachers can identify student needs and plan appropriate instructional strategies. In other words, we should "steer by results."
- Differential support and intervention must occur to ensure the success of students with special and diverse needs.

To successfully inform students and parents of progress:

- Individual student scores should be provided in the core areas.
- Information to students, parents and school staff members should be timely and readily accessible.
- Progress reports should be clear and easily understood by all.
- The criteria for judging mastery of the standards should be clear and commonly understood by parents, students and educators.

To successfully provide information on program effectiveness:

- The assessment results should provide the type of information stakeholders need to evaluate program effectiveness in helping students achieve standards.
- Data should be reported in a variety of ways for different audiences and purposes.

As a result of the assessment component of the continuous improvement accountability system, we expect the following:

- Schools will set performance targets for continuous progress relative to achievement of standards.
- Assessment data will be used to improve instruction and increase learning in the classroom.
- Students and parents will receive individual data with which to judge student progress and achievement.
- Districts will monitor programs for effectiveness and make modifications accordingly.

4. We believe that support and resources are needed to implement the elements of a continuous improvement accountability system.

There is a substantial amount of systemic change that will be required for a standards-based system. This transformation includes strengthening curriculum and tying it to meaningful and diverse assessments, enhancing teachers' instructional and diagnostic skills, reorganizing fiscal resources and time to better support student learning, and putting in place interventions designed to help each student succeed.

Resources sufficient to accomplish this change must be provided and be responsive to varying district needs. Flexibility must be included to address the unique constraints under which small school districts operate. Examples of resources include support for updating curriculum, refining methods of instruction and assessment procedures, and providing appropriate instructional materials and professional development. In addition, the emphasis on results will require support in the area of data collection, analysis and reporting.

Professional development must be designed to increase local capacity to meet the goal of continuously improving student learning. Teachers and administrators will need intensive, ongoing professional development regarding the alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment. Sufficient time for research-based professional development, based on National Staff Development Council Standards, must be allocated.

Meaningful change takes time. The implementation of a standards-based accountability system must be given time to work. All too often, state and federal mandates alter and or add requirements and initiatives. This results in changes in focus that diffuse energy devoted to improvement efforts. Success is dependent upon state leaders ensuring all proposed initiatives and legislation will further the work of implementing a standards-based accountability system. Standards-based education must be recognized as the overarching reform initiative in California schools. A standards-based accountability system will make it possible for California schools to align all support, resources and personnel to focus on student results and improved student learning.

Improvement efforts must be coordinated and organized at the local level with students, parents, educators, school board members and community members. Flexibility is key to enabling districts to put in place their own policies and practices to help students achieve at higher levels. County offices, the California Department of Education and other educational support systems must organize to help districts and schools reach their goals and share accountability for results.

Higher education also has a critical role in supporting the system's success. Teachers and administrators will need ongoing preparation and training. College entrance requirements must align to state standards. This will create the seamless pathways we desire for students. With effective, expert assistance from all stakeholders, California schools will successfully transform to a standards-based instructional system.

Community support is a necessary resource for this focus on improved student learning to occur. Schools must educate parents and community members about the intricacies and importance of assessment. Parents must share the responsibility for raising student achievement by making sure their children attend school, study, read and do homework. They should learn about the standards their children are expected to reach and become involved in helping their children to achieve these standards. The community at large is also needed in a myriad of ways, including involvement in school programs and restructuring efforts. These partnerships will enable the public schools to make learning more engaging, challenging and relevant in motivating students to achieve life-long success.

It is important that students understand the standards and how they will be assessed. The system must provide ongoing feedback on progress toward meeting standards so students can take responsibility for their learning.

As a result of sustained resources and support for the continuous improvement accountability system, we expect the following:

- Students, parents, educators and community members engaged in ongoing improvement efforts.
- Teachers and administrators trained to teach, assess information and skills articulated in standards and use assessment data to improve instruction for students.
- A focus on early intervention and incentives for continuous improvement.
- Higher levels of learning and achievement by all students.

5. We believe that a standards-based accountability system fully shared and supported by all stakeholders will ensure the needed systemic changes for improved student learning and achievement.

The transformation of California's schools depends on the successful implementation of an integrated, standards-based accountability system. The key interlinked elements of the system include standards, assessment, resources and support, and shared roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. In addition, local flexibility must be allowed so schools districts are free to devise and implement their own plans for success. Options must be available to schools so barriers to improvement can be easily removed.

The current system must be changed to measure gains in student achievement rather than adherence to rules and regulations. Sufficient time must be allowed for the system to succeed. Failure to address any one of the elements will jeopardize the success of the state's reform initiative.

At the current time there is no one coherent accountability system in place for California's schools. Districts are asked to comply with a variety of regulations for each state and federal program. This situation causes confusion, frustration, lack of coherence and fragmentation, and it wastes precious time and resources. There is a desperate need for one integrated accountability system that coordinates all local, state and federal requirements to focus on improved student learning. The accreditation of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), and provisions of programs and initiatives like the Program Quality Review (PQR), Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), and Coordinated Compliance Review (CCR) must be integrated into the state's standards-based accountability system.

One of the most difficult issues will be the need for interventions and a multitude of instructional strategies for students who do not meet standards. This need will call for creative solutions while placing great demands on the time, energy and fiscal resources available. Districts and schools will

need more support and assistance than currently exists to effectively design and implement a continuum of interventions. Ongoing assessments are needed to provide teachers, administrators, students and parents clear and useful information regarding each student's academic progress. The data collected from state and local assessments should be used to analyze student success and modify instructional programs in the core content areas. Data that reflects the percentage of students meeting or exceeding rigorous content and performance standards should be the basis for the accountability system. The focus of accountability should be on student learning, with schools continuously increasing the percent of students meeting or exceeding standards. The data must be divided by gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status and special needs groups to assure equity and equal access.

For a standards-based accountability system to provide consistency, equity and increasing productivity, all schools must have a plan that sets direction. The plan will show how all resources available—general fund and categorical—will be used to accomplish school goals. Although all schools will strive for the same result—all students meeting standards—the system must be responsive to the fact that local needs and operations will vary.

The accountability system must be supportive rather than punitive. The focus should clearly be on helping schools in their efforts to optimize achievement for all students. Schools designated as high-performing should be those in which high percentages of students have met or exceeded standards, or those in which increasing percentages meet standards. We believe the system should provide recognition for these schools, spotlighting their success stories for the benefit of others.

If a school is identified as low-performing, an accountability process should be initiated at the local level. During a specific time period, the school should conduct an in-depth, diagnostic analysis to determine why standards are not being met and design an improvement plan. If the implementation of this plan does not result in sufficient improvement, outside resources and expert assistance must be provided.

In a comprehensive, standards-based accountability system for continuous improvement, responsibility for the improvement of student achievement rests with all stakeholders. The roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder group—from boards of education, superintendents, teachers and principals to students, parents and the community at large—must be carefully defined and clearly communicated.

Training and support must be provided to help stakeholders assume their roles and carry out their responsibilities, individually and collectively. In turn, all stakeholders must agree to accept shared responsibility, and the associated accountability, for the education of all students. Mutual accountability calls for a collaborative partnership among all those with a stake in the educational enterprise.

As a result of shared accountability in a standards-based system we expect the following:

- Schools held to rigorous, world-class standards.
- Improved student learning, evidenced by increasing numbers of students meeting or exceeding standards.
- A process to recognize and help schools assure student success.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

This is an important time in the history of education. We face significant challenges in meeting the needs of our diverse student population and addressing the public's demand for improvement. While the challenges are considerable, we have a unique opportunity to develop a system that reflects our vision of high achievement for all California students.

We are committed to providing leadership in the development of a continuous improvement accountability system as described in this position paper. The system we propose will require significant changes in the way we do business. We enjoy a richly diverse and changing student population; societal needs and expectations are also changing. Such changes present us with challenges that our current structure and way of operating are not equipped to handle. A system designed to deal with such challenges must be fair to students, teachers and administrators while making necessary changes in roles, relationships and responsibilities.

Simply put, the system we envision emphasizes incentives rather than punishments, includes the support and resources needed to accomplish the magnitude of change required, and focuses on increased and continuous student learning and achievement.

Editor's Note:

This position paper was developed after thorough, thoughtful discussion and debate by the following ACSA Student Performance & School Accountability Task Force members:

Co-chair	Kathleen McCreery, Baldwin Park Unified SD
Co-chair	Joann Merrick, Glendale Unified SD
	Sally Bennett, San Diego City SD
	Gerry Chartrand, Campbell USD
	Jane Gawronski, Escondido UHSD
	Tim McCarty, San Juan Unified SD
	Jim Negri, Pleasanton Unified SD
	Giannina Santangelo, Educational Consultant
	Glen Thomas, ACSA Board of Directors
	Tom Zach, Jefferson Elementary SD
	Ernest Zermeno, King City Jt. UHSD
Consultants	Jo Sue Whisler, McREL
	Don Burger, McREL
	Hillary Michaels, McREL
Staff Liaisons	Jane Zimmer
	Florence Webb
	Suzanne Zimmerman
	Milly Martinez

Association of California
School Administrators
1517 L Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

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